

In A Dangerous Time

**BRUCE COCKBURN ON HIS
RAGE, HIS MUSIC, AND HIS
HUNGER FOR THE DIVINE**

GREG KING

Bruce Cockburn slides up on his bike, emerging from the dark night into the circle of light around the Delta Hotel in downtown Montreal. He's an apparition of recent promo shots, wearing a dark suit and a flashing red light to pedal across town. He's five minutes early.

"An indulgence," he says of the new bike — which is a funny thing to hear from somebody who's sold 7 million albums over his thirty-three-year music career.

The parking-lot attendant eyes us curiously as we amble toward the Saint Lawrence Seaway, Cockburn pushing the bike. In the restaurant we talk over raw caribou and Italian red wine. The life of the man across from me is at once a mystery and an open secret, where radical politics, a complex Christianity, and platinum record sales converge.

Cockburn genially ignores stares from other diners and speaks almost casually about walking through minefields and moonscaped forests. Success has not jaded him. He shrugs at the list of achievements brandished by his publicists: eleven Juno Awards (the Canadian equivalent of a Grammy), including a lifetime-achievement award; induction into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame; a Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies; three honorary PhDs. Cockburn's accomplishments are tempered by the darkness he so skillfully offers up to his listeners — along with rarer but equally compelling celebrations of light and the divine.

As a performer, Cockburn defies imitation. No two of his twenty-five original albums sound alike. Search the Web and you'll find four sites dedicated solely to his music. Cockburn's fans might be accused of cultlike behavior were they not generally such freethinkers. Suzanne Myers, an elementary-school teacher in upstate New York and editor of *CockburnProject.net*, tells me, "I 'found' his music right when I was needing someone who understood what I was going through. . . . His willingness to look under the dark underpinnings and delve even deeper gave me the inspiration to do the same."

Born in 1945 in Ottawa, Canada, Cockburn can be subtle or blunt, painting nature and humanity with a fine brush, or doling out epithets to warmongers, international loan sharks, and fundamentalists. During the 1970s Cockburn's lyrics often alluded to his Christian faith, but since then the cross has been mostly absent from his music, replaced to a large extent by secular concerns.

In January, Cockburn traveled to Iraq to see "American empire-building" up close. He has also traveled in Central America with war victims; visited African refugee camps; dodged land mines in Mozambique; prayed over killing fields in Cambodia; ridden camels on once-fertile deserts in Mali; drunk millet beer with Tibetan dissidents in Nepal; walked the streets of Germany three days after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (watching panicked pedestrians duck from the rain); and protested the recent



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G-8 Summit in his homeland of Canada. And for every foray into the madness and pathos and beauty, there's been a song.

On the title cut of his new album, You've Never Seen Everything, Cockburn seeks "somewhere to put the rage I'm carrying." It's been a long search. Cockburn's rage made the Top 40 in 1984 with "If I Had a Rocket Launcher," a song he wrote after interviewing Central American refugees whose families had suffered U.S.-backed atrocities "too sickening to relate," the song says. "Rocket Launcher" was a surprise coming from the peaceable — though not pacifistic — Cockburn. The song startled some of his fans at a time when he was still widely known as "that Christian singer."

Two days after our dinner, I interview Cockburn in his small two-story house in central Montreal, sunlight bleeding warmly through western windows before sliding behind Mount Royal. We're surrounded by Cockburn's collection of handmade war toys: a scrap-metal machine gun from Nicaragua, a wicker tank from Mozambique. I sit across from a flock of guitars, my elbow nudging a tall display case holding ornate knives and swords. Cockburn's strong intellect meanders like water in a delta as he chronicles his political involvement and near ceaseless travel. Despite his hectic schedule — he really did once have "breakfast in New Orleans and dinner in Timbuktu," as an album title says — he is patient and thoughtful throughout our conversation.

King: Your activist colleague Jody Williams, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and founder of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, calls the current Bush administration "the most dangerous in U.S. history." How do you think this administration compares with, say, the Ronald Reagan administration?

Cockburn: Reagan was the first cosmetic president. He seemed to be nothing but appearances. His successor, the first President Bush, was not cosmetic. This was a guy who had been head of the secret police, the CIA. He was presumably an adept string-puller, someone who hides his real activities behind the facade of the presidency, like a con game to keep the public docile.

It's hard for me to understand how Americans feel about their president. I've never been anywhere else where people invest so much of their own ego in the head of state. People in the U.S. take criticism of the president personally. "Our president, right or wrong" is the attitude. But the president of the United States is just an elected bozo, no better than the rest of us.

King: Now that bozo has invaded and occupied Iraq.

Cockburn: What the occupation of Iraq, and the public perception of it in the U.S., reminds me of is the German occupation of Holland during the Second World War. The Germans thought that the Dutch would welcome them with open



BRUCE COCKBURN

arms, but of course the Dutch hated them. And the German people were offended. That's what we're seeing in the United States. People were told before the war that the Iraqis were going to welcome Americans with open arms, because the U.S. was saving them from this horrible dictator. But they haven't. Journalist and columnist Christopher Hitchens may write about how happy the Iraqis are that the Americans are there, but the Iraqis are killing Americans, and there's a reason for that. The Americans are an occupying force. When you put a bunch of kids with guns in charge of a place, bad things will happen.

King: Aldous Huxley wrote that a truly efficient totalitarian state was one in which the "population of slaves . . . do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude." Would you say that this description applies to the U.S. today?

Cockburn: Noam Chomsky, in the October 2003 issue of *The Sun*, spoke eloquently about that very thing when he said that the Republican agenda in the U.S. is to keep people self-interested and afraid, and therefore malleable. But it's not just fear. Big business has been very successful at promoting the idea of riches for everybody. Obviously that's a completely unrealistic expectation, but they've been successful in selling it. And if the bribe of riches doesn't work, they use fear.

King: Economic control is a favorite export of the U.S. Your song "Call It Democracy," written in 1985, slams the International Monetary Fund for subjugating poor cultures in order to enrich wealthy nations. When did you start examining global economic policies?

Cockburn: Flying back from Japan at the end of the seventies, I sat next to a businessman who turned out to be a representative of the World Bank. He proudly told me about his job, how they were planning to move people around the globe like just another commodity. In the eighties, during my travels in the Third World, I saw the effects of that kind of thinking and heard from its victims. That stirred up some anger, which produced "Call It Democracy."

That was during the Cold War, when the spread of free trade was somehow supposed to spread democracy. Now trade officials no longer have to resort to that kind of lie. They actually come out and say they're doing it for the money. And we

I feel as if there's a war going on in the human species between our hunger for contact with the divine and our urge to self-destruct. The world of transnational business and free trade represents the urge to self-destruct.

can have some of it too, if we help them.

King: Officials at the World Bank and the IMF also say, "We're lifting countries out of poverty. We're helping them to join the world market."

Cockburn: The short answer to that is: "Bullshit." The longer, more truthful answer is that there are some benefits for some people. It's just being done the wrong way. People's choices are being taken away.

The issue is not whether business is being conducted in Third World countries, but *how* it's being conducted. At the moment, corporations control everything: scientific research, the movement of populations, political choices — and this is in supposedly free countries. Through pollutants and genetic manipulation of food, corporations control what we eat and the hormonal structure of our bodies. It's all about greed. It's a scam, yet it's making some people comfortable, so they get away with it. Nations that take exception to it are made very uncomfortable for as long as it takes to get them to play ball.

King: Such as?

Cockburn: Such as Iraq, Indonesia, Nicaragua. Governments that resist this process are undermined, and if that doesn't work, they're destroyed. This has been going on in the Western Hemisphere since the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 [which states that the U.S. would regard as an "unfriendly act" any attempt by a European nation to interfere in the politics of the Americas]. It would be oversimplifying the matter to say that the U.S. is the only perpetrator. Obviously there are transnational businesses involved. Canada-based mining companies are as guilty as anyone else of mistreating workers and the environment.

But the U.S. has been willing to stand up and be a symbol of this stuff. At the moment it's certainly the country with the most clout, and therefore the most able to keep things going in this particular direction.

I find the outlook for the future of this planet very disturbing. What problems are my grandchildren going to face? Too many people don't seem to care about that question. I don't understand how people can not care that their own offspring are going to have to reap the disastrous "rewards" of this process.

King: Your first political excursion was in 1983, to a Guatemalan refugee camp in Mexico. Later that year you traveled to Nicaragua, Honduras, and Chile, and you have subsequently visited a dozen political hot spots around the world. But it was that first experience in Mexico that catalyzed you. Why did you decide to get involved?

Cockburn: My brother, who'd been doing solidarity work with Salvadoran rebels, had been trying to interest me in Central American politics for years. I was sympathetic to what he was doing, but I was absorbed in other things. Eventually he told me things about the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979 that

didn't conform to my stereotype of a banana-republic revolution. There had been no blood bath, but rather this enlightened behavior on the part of the Sandinista revolutionaries. What did it mean? I was curious to see it for myself. A couple of months later, Oxfam asked me to go to Mexico and Central America on its behalf. It was a perfect opportunity.

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